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The Ridiculous Performance of Taylor Mac

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Taylor Mac is a contemporary actor and playwright who carries on the tradition of the Ridiculous Theatre for the twenty-first century. After solidifying his reputation as an actor in the 1990s, Mac became aware of the first-wave Ridiculous canon of Jack Smith, Ronald Tavel, and Ethyl Eichelberger and immersed himself in the works of Charles Ludlam. Ludlam, considered by many to be the seminal Ridiculous *auteur*, developed the Ridiculous form by writing, directing, and appearing in twenty-nine original plays for his Ridiculous Theatrical Company (RTC) between its founding in 1967 and his untimely death in 1987. Ludlam's Ridiculous aesthetic juxtaposed the modernist tradition of the avant-garde with camp, clowning, and drag. Forming within the gay community at the watershed of gay liberation, it was one of the first fully realized queer theatre forms in the United States. More specifically, it mixed high literary culture with low pop culture, generating a pastiche that reflected and satirized contemporary society.[1] Farcical in nature, the Ridiculous contributed to the emergence of the postmodern clown,[2] a comic figure who appropriates traditional clowning skills and "fragments, subverts and inverts" them to create a self-reflexive and deconstructive performance.[3] By layering Ludlam's clown (an entertainer combining traditional

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[1] The roots of Ridiculous lie in the underground theatrical and filmic works of Jack Smith, Ron Rice, Ronald Tavel, and John Vaccaro. Although Ludlam joined the fold after the genre had already been defined in the early 1960s, he had the most popular and financial success with the Ridiculous, developing his own personal style and approach. For a comprehensive overview of the genre, see Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta, *Theatre of the Ridiculous*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); and Sean F. Edgecomb, "History of the Ridiculous, 1960–1987," *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 14, no. 3 (2007): 21–22. For works pertaining specifically to Ludlam's contribution to the Ridiculous genre, see David Kaufman, *Ridiculous! The Theatrical Life and Times of Charles Ludlam* (New York: Applause, 2002); Rick Roemer, *Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company: Critical Analyses of 29 Plays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998); and Gregg Bordowitz, *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986–2003* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

[2] The clown is an overarching type that may include, but is not limited to, comedians, comics, fools, jesters, picaros, mimes, tricksters, idiot savants, sage fools, natural freaks, made freaks, drolls, farceurs, Harlequins, pranksters, wags, and wits.

[3] David Robb, *Clowns, Fools and Picaros: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction and Film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 3.

comic skills with camp) with the alternative persona of the fool (a figure whose comic identity is a reflection of his status as a born outsider), Mac provocatively adopts and extends Ludlam's Ridiculous, employing it as a tool for political satire and radical social commentary. This essay will trace Mac's development as a neo-Ridiculous artist in response to the Al Qaeda–perpetrated terrorist attacks of 9/11, focusing on four of his works from this period—*The Face of Liberalism* (2003), *Red Tide Blooming* (2006), *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac* (2006), and *The Young Ladies of . . .* (2007)—in order to demonstrate his role as a torchbearer of Ludlam's original Ridiculous. Through analysis of these foundational shows from the period during which Mac laid the groundwork for his signature fool persona through a personal interpretation of the Ridiculous aesthetic, I trace the evolution of his neo-Ridiculous performance from its origins as an amateur one-man show in a New York City bar to his more fully developed plays, which continue to be commissioned and produced by professional theatres across the globe. In doing so, I provide a foundation for understanding Mac's growing body of work.

In his performances, Mac is consciously haunted by the ghost of the original Ridiculous; but rather than as a man possessed, he acts as a medium to the spirit, which, in the words of Joseph Roach, allows him to "bring forth, to make manifest, and to transmit."[4] Roach suggests that the making of culture through the practice of performance is inherently re-inventionist, allowing for a process that is generative and productive. In contemporary Ridiculous performance, Mac seeks both to resurrect and transform predecessors like Ludlam. In this way, his Ridiculous aesthetic exemplifies the operations of queer legacy in David Román's sense of "provisional collectives," where "certain artists mark themselves as historical subjects whose genealogies might be found outside of traditional systems of identification and belonging."[5] Román elucidates his concept through the notion of "archival drag," which refers to "the nature of contemporary performances that draw on historical reembodiment and expertise."[6] When brought into conversation with Elizabeth Freeman's "temporal drag," which she defines as "a kind of historicist *jouissance*, a friction of dead bodies upon live ones, [and] obsolete constructions upon emergent ones," drag is extended beyond early utopian notions introduced by Judith Butler and favors particular acts of drag drawn from social history.[7] If the Ludlamesque legacy is what Mac figuratively drags behind himself as a connection to the past, the acknowledgment of this trailing history allows Mac to cut the ties, creating a momentum that propels him forward into new performative manifestations of the Ridiculous.

Mac's Formative Years (1991–2002)

Taylor Mac (Bowyer) (1973–) grew up on the West Coast and had no access to downtown New York theatre until he was an adult.[8] Because of this distance both

[4] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xi.

[5] David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1, 3.

[6] Ibid., 142.

[7] Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography," *Social Text* 23, nos. 3/4 (2005): 66. For a more detailed discussion of temporal drag, see Freeman, "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 727–44.

[8] When Mac started acting professionally, he dropped his surname, Bowyer, and began using "Taylor Mac" as his stage name.

in location and culture, his approach to performance developed independently until he eventually became a vibrant part of New York City's queer avant-garde tradition. After graduating from high school in Stockton, California, in 1991, he moved to San Francisco, because it was the "closest city, and gayest city," and the ideal place for him to come out of the closet.[9] San Francisco offered him a hodge-podge education that included professional acting training and practical experience as a working actor.[10]

Mac moved to New York City in 1994 to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts (AADA), where he continued his acting training and studied theatre history, and where he also learned that the AADA had been the training ground for Ethyl Eichelberger (né James Roy Eichelberger, 1945–90), who would influence his emerging interest in the Ridiculous aesthetic.[11] A classically trained actor like Ludlam, Eichelberger developed her unique Ridiculous sensibility while working with Ludlam and the RTC. After leaving the company to pursue a career as a solo performer, she migrated from the West Village to the bohemian world of the Lower East Side in the early 1980s and became known for her one-woman shows featuring iconic women from history and mythology, including *Nefert-iti* (1978), *Jocasta* (1982), and *Medusa* (1985). Eichelberger was a seminal figure in the post-Stonewall queer theatre movement before committing suicide in 1990, unable to tolerate the harsh side effects of her prescribed AIDS medication.[12]

Upon graduating from the AADA, Mac performed in regional theatres across the United States and began developing his own ideas as a playwright. Seeking an outlet to express his frustration with the state of US theatre, he began writing what he called "kooky" plays with traditional structures, such as *The Hot Month* (written in 1999), in which the beat of a heart monitor sets the pace and tone as a sister, a brother, and his male lover struggle to find their own identities and come to grips with one another in the face of death, and *The Levee* (written in 2000), a kitchen-sink drama about a heterosexual couple attempting to deal with the pain and pressure of repeated miscarriages. In the summer of 2000, Mac headed to the gay resort of Provincetown, Massachusetts, to focus on his newfound vocation as playwright and experiment with thrift-store drag performance. Because "P-Town" constitutes a living archive of inter-generational activity among gay men, Mac's drag appearance on the scene inspired comparisons to Ridiculous founders Smith, Tavel, and Ludlam. Such comparisons motivated Mac to immerse himself in the Ridiculous canon and learn its history. He discovered that the first manifestation of the Ridiculous took place in 1965 at the Play-House of the Ridiculous (PHR), founded by Tavel as resident playwright and John Vaccaro as director. Tavel and Vaccaro formulated the pastiche style of the Ridiculous in early plays like *Shower* (1965) and *The Life of Juanita Castro* (1965), both of which were originally intended for but rejected by Andy Warhol's Factory. In 1966, Ludlam, fresh from the

[9] Taylor Mac, personal interview with author, 11 March 2008. Unless otherwise attributed, information about Mac's views and personal history is based on this interview.

[10] During this period, Mac trained with the San Fransicso Mime troupe (his introduction to *commedia dell'arte*) and appeared in the juke box–style drag revue *Beach Blanket Babylon.*

[11] Mac, interview.

[12] Sean Edgecomb, "'Not Just Any Woman': Bradford Louryk, a Legacy of Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatre for the Twenty-First Century," in *"We Will Be Citizens": New Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theatre,* ed. James Fisher (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 56–78. For more on Ethyl Eichelberger, see Joe E. Jeffreys, "An Outré Entrée into the Para-Ridiculous Histrionics of Drag Diva Ethyl Eichelberger: A True Story" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1996).

drama program at Hofstra University, joined the PHR as an actor and playwright and his Ridiculous fate was sealed. A year later, he mutinied from Tavel and Vaccaro with a majority of the company in tow, formed the RTC, and became the key figure in the movement for the next twenty years. Many of the summer residents in Provincetown had firsthand recollections of Ludlam both personally and in performance, providing Mac with an education drawn from memory and experience.

During this summer, Mac also discovered the Ludlamesque interpretation of the clown. Ludlam was notorious for channeling his comic stage personae through a distinctive clown character pastiched from a grand tradition of clown types, including Greek mimes, the auguste, Arlecchino (Harlequin), the scapegoat, and the medieval court jester, and exemplified in his characters Saint Obnoxious (*Turds in Hell,* 1968), The Fool (*The Grand Tarot,* 1969), and Mr. Foufas the farceur (*Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde,* 1983). Ludlam relied on camp to construct his clown persona, becoming a covert spokesperson for the gay community that was gaining visibility in New York in the 1970s. His distinct sense of camp as "an outsider's view of things"[13] was employed as a method by which marginalized outsiders could communicate with like-minded individuals through a series of codes—a secret language.[14] For Ludlam, the concept of camp was thus a combination of the ideas inherent in his plays and the larger-than-life aesthetic choices in his productions.

He further fashioned his clown through the practice of "gender-fuck" drag, which hyperbolizes expressions of artificiality (both aesthetic and gestural) to "fuck" with gender perceptions. A signature feature of Ludlam's heightened stage clowns, this gender-fuck camp aesthetic distinguished his groundbreaking interpretations of Norma Desmond (*Big Hotel,* 1967), Maria Magdalena Galas (his homage to Maria Callas; *Galas,* 1983), and Lady Enid (*The Mystery of Irma Vep,* 1984), as well as his performance in his 1973 adaptation of *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *fils*. In Ludlam's *Camille*, the doomed romantic relationship between the courtesan Marguerite and her lover Armand Duval, played by Ludlam and RTC member Bill Vehr, respectively, demonstrates how Ludlam strategically mimicked a normative relationship to openly depict a gay romance onstage. Although portrayed by two gay men, Marguerite and Armand's relationship was approached with complete sincerity and dedication in an effort to facilitate what Ludlam referred to as "believ[ing] in the character beyond the gender of the actor."[15] Even though Ludlam displayed his hairy chest and arms in his low-cut, nineteenth-century-style gown, he drew the audience into the story enough to forget the intentional artificiality, camp, and anarchic disregard for verisimilitude in the production.

Drawing on Ludlam's distinct drag aesthetic and understanding of camp, Mac filters the practice of gender-fuck through the figure of the fool, drawing upon the color, tone, and infrastructure of the time and place in which he lives. Enid Welsford defines the fool as one who has "the mouthpiece of a spirit, or power external to himself, and so has access to hidden knowledge—especially to knowledge of the future."[16] The fool

[13] Charles Ludlam, *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly—The Essays and Opinions of Charles Ludlam*, ed. Steven Samuels (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), 225.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Marranca and Dasgupta, *Theatre of the Ridiculous*, 78.

[16] Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 76.

possesses a seemingly clairvoyant ability to see beyond the imposed boundaries of a society, making him a gauge of the moral underpinnings of a civilized culture. Mac's version of the fool lies closest to what Louis Pétit de Julleville refers to as "la jeunesse abandonée à la nature,"[17] the fool who is cast out by the civilized into the wilds, where he adapts to and eventually rules his surroundings. In Mac's case, he is the gay youth rejected by a normative culture and given up to the wilds of New York City, where he finds respite from homophobia through opportunities for the formation of community. In this context, Mac as fool found the opportunity to establish his own fool society, inviting audiences into his own queer space rather than entering the mainstream.

After fashioning an early version of his gender-fuck fool character (a "Pierrot figure for the modern age,"[18] and "a stage-worthy representation of himself"[19]) during his Provincetown sojourn in 2000–2001, Mac began doing short performances at New York City gay bars, including the Marquis and the Slide. Performing five-minute comic vignettes, he began to gain celebrity among the subcultural coteries of downtown New York. This early career approach to theatre in a variety of found spaces reflected Ludlam's origins, when he and the PHR performed *Turds in Hell* in a porno cinema on 42nd Street and the RTC presented *Bluebeard* (1970) on reclaimed boards laid precariously across the bar at the West Village watering-hole Christopher's End.

Describing his stylistic approach as "Hey, let's put on a show!"[20] Mac took up the tradition of the "moldy aesthetic" that was introduced by Jack Smith, the "daddy" of the Ridiculous,[21] and that creates art from the abandoned refuse of others, often coating it in glitter. In his 1962 essay "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," Smith states that "trash is the material of creators."[22] The communal freedom and opportunity for improvisatory creation or deconstruction implied in Smith's eccentric vision was communicated directly through his underground films *Flaming Creatures* (1962–63) and *Normal Love* (1963) and his play *Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis* (1965). Smith's work was irrefutably political in its attack on American capitalism couched in metaphors, such as his use of a Lobster to represent the "epitome of the avaricious landlord . . . who increasingly held the world in his grip."[23] The theme of material and social refuse became emblematic of the era, with works such as John Waters's *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and Andy Warhol's *Trash* (1970). Ludlam continued this adoration for the disposed by rifling through trash in order to compose his plays.[24]

[17] Louis Pétit de Julleville, *La comédie et les moeurs en France au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Adamant Media Corp., 2001), 282.

[18] Taylor Mac press quotes, available at *http://www.taylormac.net/TaylorMac.net/Press%20Quotes.html* (accessed 25 April 2012).

[19] Mac, interview.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ludlam referred to Smith as "the daddy of us all"; quoted in Stefan Brecht, *Queer Theatre* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), 28.

[22] Jack Smith, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith,* ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 26.

[23] Ibid., 18. For more on Smith, see *Flaming Creature: Jack Smith, His Amazing Life and Times*, ed. Edward Leffingwell, Carole Kismaric, and Marvin Heiferman (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997); and Hoberman and Leffingwell, eds., *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*.

[24] J. Hoberman, "Jack Smith: Bagdada and Lobsterrealism" Introduction, in Hoberman and Leffingwell, eds., *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*, 17.

Following in this tradition, Mac began to create new art thematically born from the destruction and refuse of the 9/11 terrorist attack in the same way that his predecessors had created work from their own beloved trash heaps. His early drag aesthetic was "glamorously beaten" in style, with smeared makeup and layers of violently ripped garments.[25] A mélange of enlightened precision and premeditated disarray, Mac's drag became the omnipresent metaphor steering his artistic practice, his at-odds aesthetic serving as a visual allegory for the political themes on which his work is based. In *The Face of Liberalism*, for example, a homemade dress of dirty latex gloves was a metaphor for "The War on Terror," the filthy, cheap, and haphazard garment physically representing what Mac calls the "mess" in the Middle East.[26] Mac's image thus reflected his frustration with the state of the war-driven American political climate post-9/11.

Although Mac had lived in the East Village for several years, the period directly following 9/11 was his first opportunity to perform in the unconventionally laissez-faire climate of downtown Manhattan, where the theatre scene provided room for experimentation and failure that enabled him to thrive. As he has explained: "Uptown, failure is unacceptable, but suddenly downtown I found this access to a world that was just embracing of performance, and of difference, and of being in the moment, and kookiness, and failure. [Downtown] they'll clap more for you if you fail."[27] Mac's reflections on the power of failure resonate with Judith Halberstam's view that in a queer context, failure may "offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."[28]

The Face of Liberalism (2003)

Following out of these formative years, Mac turned to political performance, motivated by a purpose to reveal what he considers to be "the end of an American empire."[29] His one-man show *The Face of Liberalism* was prompted by the White House's response to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. In developing the show, he began to evolve his signature fool persona as an extension of himself, a social commentator who reveals truths, bravely speaking against dominant sociopolitical beliefs, in this case the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. Mac's fool is a hybrid of traditional fool archetypes: as an artist, he is an artificial fool who uses slick wit to entertain the audience, but he also takes on the role of the natural fool, a figure shunned as an outsider, ostracized as a self-identifying queer. When in this mode, Mac refers to himself as "a bedazzled creature [who] builds community."[30] His ideal vision of this community is a magnanimous collective composed of self-identifying queer activists and their allies.

Performed from May to October 2003 in the basement of the Slide bar on the Bowery in New York's East Village, *The Face of Liberalism* was arguably the first theatre piece to interrogate and satirize the climate of fear and resultant xenophobia that Mac suggests came from the Bush White House following 9/11. Reinventing the Ridiculous genre as "in-yer-face" Americana, Mac succeeded in this work in morphing Ludlam's mid-century gay theatre into a more socially conscious version, while preserving the

[25] Tigger Ferguson, personal communication with author, 11 April 2008.
[26] Mac, interview.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2.
[29] Mac, interview.
[30] Taylor Mac, personal communication with author, 19 July 2012.

extremist and histrionic nature of the original. Just as the original Ridiculous thrived on the creation of exclusive safe space as a site for politically unrestrained expression, *The Face of Liberalism* invited participants into an alternate world, where Mac played the role of a postmodern Lord of Misrule. Describing the show as "a subversive jukebox musical," he relied upon the preferred Ridiculous practice of pastiche to formulate the highly politicized work.[31] Advertised as "a mish-mash of original songs, parodies, stories, and mental illness,"[32] the show was based around a set list of original songs that included "War Criminal Romp," a New Orleans–style jazz tune in which the lyrics are a recitation of the names of supporters of the Bush administration, and "Fear Itself," a thoughtful ballad that Mac sang without accompaniment, closing the show with the lyrics: "I'm afraid of patriotism, and nationalism, and jingoism / We've nothing to fear but fear itself, fear itself, fear itself."[33] Although the songs remained the same for each performance, Mac added transitional topical and anecdotal monologues about the state of US society in the period following 9/11. In one such monologue, he explored tackiness through the persona of a disenfranchised teenage Goth: "People are selling baby American flags on the street for two dollars when you know they only cost like two cents and were made by some Taiwanese premi-baby in their makeshift bamboo incubator."[34]

In addition to such criticisms, Mac improvised dialogue rooted in the news of the day, and each night, in a postmodern riff on the Federal Theatre Project's Depression-era "living newspapers," he crafted a Warholian newsprint dress that featured his favorite headline of the day. One night, for example, his disposable bodice featured the headline "Liza Beat Me" in bold-faced type, referring to the accusations of David Gest against his ex-wife Liza Minnelli. This absurd recipe of pointed current events and references to pop culture exemplify Mac's particular Ridiculous sensibility.

Toward the end of its run, Mac developed distinctive makeup for *The Face of Liberalism*, painting his face with the stars and stripes of the American flag, applying thumbtacks to his jaw with spirit gum—points facing outward—and wearing a curling ribbon red-white-and-blue wig (fig. 1). The deconstructed flag motif, created with drugstore cosmetics and stationery-aisle craft supplies, was a visceral expression of his agenda as a citizen/artist to "reveal the truth," his face a billboard for self-created graffiti, articulating his identity through its hyperbolized freakishness in a contemporary interpretation of the queer fool.[35] Although Mac continued to use the tri-color scheme as his guide, his makeup evolved and changed nightly, marking each aesthetic interpretation as unique and ephemeral like the performance itself. His practice of employing his body as canvas marks him as a queer subject, his changing physical appearance a metaphor for performative gender. In a state of constant transformation, he creates a sense of agency that, in Victoria Pitts's words, "underscores the body's symbolic significance as a site of public identity and a resource for opposing (hetero) dominant culture."[36] In this vein, Mac offers his physical body as a corporeal representative of

[31] Mac, interview.

[32] *The Face of Liberalism*, Taylor Mac, available at *http://www.taylormac.net/TaylorMac.net/The_Face_of_Liberalism.html* (accessed 25 April 2012).

[33] Taylor Mac, *The Face of Liberalism*. Unpublished manuscript (accessible through Morgan Jenness, Abrams Artists Agency, New York City).

[34] Ibid.

[35] Mac, interview.

[36] Victoria Pitts, "Visibly Queer: Body Technologies and Sexual Politics," *Sociological Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2000): 443.

Figure 1. Taylor Mac in his signature tri-color makeup from *The Face of Liberalism* (2003). (Photo: Derrick Little, courtesy of Taylor Mac.)

the liberal body politic, embodying the Foucauldian notion of the body as a text on which social reality is inscribed.[37]

The Face of Liberalism provided a potential refuge for like-minded audience members who openly criticized the conservative political majority during a time of jingoistic fervor—the period directly following 9/11. Although audiences for the run of the show were admittedly limited, the performance space successfully doubled as a site of refuge and communion for urban Americans who harbored similar feelings of frustration with prevailing hegemonic ideologies that promoted xenophobia and absolutism. Mac embodied, hyperbolized, and performed this minority position through his carefully

[37] Thomas J. Csordas, ed., *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12.

constructed image: a voluntary scapegoat, the traditional fool archetype reclaimed as a figurehead with a political agenda. In offering up his cosmeticized visage for consumption, he willingly became the unlikely "face" of liberalism. His continuing political stance as a self-proclaimed liberal is driven by his belief in a democratic society that supports the expression of individual freedoms across "a range of humanity."[38] When read in combination, themes discussed in *The Face of Liberalism*, including blind patriotism and subsequent threats to individualism, offer a subtle critique of neoliberalism and the social detachment that Mac sees as a destructive consequence of its global proliferation.

The Face of Liberalism stands apart from Mac's later works because of its underground nature. Positioned as a piece of controversial anti-patriotic art and located surreptitiously in an East Village basement with limited advertising or press, this foundational performance marked the materialization of his fresh take on the Ludlamesque tradition in a postmillennial context.

Red Tide Blooming (2006)

In 2005, Mac was the inaugural winner of the Ethyl Eichelberger Award, a commissioning prize given in recognition of an artist who embodies Eichelberger's uninhibited aesthetic and spirit. As such, Mac was invited to compose, and funded to produce, an original work. In homage to his Ridiculous predecessors, he elected to create *Red Tide Blooming,* a play about disenfranchisement and a search for belonging that was inspired by the early epic plays of Tavel and Ludlam in the genre of pastiche.

The plot of *Red Tide Blooming* is based on the gentrification of Coney Island's Mermaid Parade, where bohemians dress up in outré costumes as marine creatures in a contemporary Feast of Fools. The capital-driven metamorphoses of the former bohemian enclaves of lower Manhattan into what is now one of the city's most unaffordable neighborhoods has forced artists to seek new haunts beyond the city proper, among them Coney Island. This migration of New York City artists to the far edge of Brooklyn, along with Coney Island's colorful past as a nonstop carnival that provided escapist amusement away from the city, inspired the creation of the Mermaid Parade in 1983. As a celebration for and of self-declared "freaks," the parade took a cue from the practice of Gay Pride parades, the popularity and carnival atmosphere of which led in the 1980s to large marketing campaigns and opportunities for the business-minded to capitalize on the crowds that gathered. Similarly, as the Mermaid Parade grew in size and popularity, the celebration that had been created as an alternative by and for disenfranchised members of society (both gay and straight) became a magnet for a wider audience.

Red Tide Blooming is a metatheatrical pageant with characters as parade participants presenting a play that seeks to answer the question: What happened to all of the freaks? Mac composed a cast of "outsiders" that included burlesque performers, performance artists, a transsexual, a couple of drag queens, radical fairies, a self-proclaimed slut, naked bodies of all shapes and sizes, four generations of performers, all different kinds of sexual perversions, and even a former PHR veteran superstar, Ruby Lynn Reyner. In bringing together a variety of well-known performers from across generations, the

[38] Taylor Mac, "Artist Statement," available at *www.taylormac.net* (accessed 11 August 2012).

cast embodied the legacy of the Ridiculous tradition in a histrionic family reunion. The decision to construct the play around contemporary stock characters is directly borrowed from Ludlam, who, as a trained expert in *commedia dell'arte*, frequently built texts around fool archetypes and situations drawn from the early modern Italian genre.[39]

The play centers around Mac-as-Olokun, a hermaphrodite sea creature who has secured his phallus to his posterior with duct tape. Mac borrowed the name Olokun, an ocean spirit who embodies equally male and female characteristics, from the Yoruba religion of West Africa. Appearing onstage on a desert island of discarded toys reminiscent of Smith's vision of a trash-heap metropolis, Mac-as-Olokun elucidates his desire to find and commune with other freaks like himself: "All the freaks? Disappeared? They can't have disappeared. Maybe they've gotten sad and have hidden away for a time."[40] Mac's interpretation of the freak resonates with Michel Foucault's views on insanity and how, as Chris Baldrick has summarized, "the freak must have a purpose: to reveal the results of vice, folly and unreason as a warning to erring humanity."[41] The "erring humanity" that Mac attempts to combat in *Red Tide Blooming* is the conservative right wing. On a Candide-like journey, Mac-as-Olokun encounters a cast of "citizens" who declare their distaste for diversity, led by the Collective Conscious, a sweater puppet that condemns social subversion with Wizard of Oz–like brainwashing. The play-within-the-play warns of an impending Armageddon brought on by the conformist agenda of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Among the characters reveling in this satirical end of days are Lynne Cheney and Saddam Hussein. Cheney, who took part in the construction of the Collective Conscious, has been thrown out of the upper echelons of political power because of her penchant for writing lesbian romance novels and having a secret love affair with Hussein. The character of Hussein is portrayed in Arabian Nights drag, a distinct reference to Jack Smith's affinity for Middle Eastern glamour.[42] While the caricatures of Cheney and Hussein are extreme, Mac presents them with empathy as two more uncomfortable freaks attempting to masquerade as normal.

Red Tide Blooming's concern with the disenfranchised Other is reiterated at the play's conclusion when the character of Constance Fauborg, an anxiety-ridden, germ-killing housewife who helps to manipulate the Collective Conscious (with Beep, a bearded lady as a male corporate cliché), exposes Olokun not as a hermaphrodite, but as a transgendered nudist. Olokun responds by ripping the duct tape from his genitals, disfigured through the act of fetishistic body modification as a symbolic expression of trans-identity for the stage. This practice not only suggests an agency of choice, but also embodies a sort of physical deviance, what Michael Atkinson refers to as a "flesh journey: [t]he process of intentionally constructing the corporeal in order to

[39] Ludlam, who offered public *commedia dell'arte* workshops at the Evergreen Theatre in 1974, noted that the Italian genre also influenced his casting process within the RTC: "Actors were chosen for their personalities, almost like 'found objects'; the character fell somewhere between the intention of the script and the personality of the actor" (Ludlam, *Ridiculous Theatre,* 17).

[40] Taylor Mac, *Red Tide Blooming*, in *Plays and Playwrights 2007,* ed. Martin Denton (New York: The New York Theatre Experience, Inc., 2007).

[41] Chris Baldrick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-century Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 10.

[42] Performance artist Ron Vawter also appeared as Jack Smith in Arabian drag for his solo piece *What's Underground About Marshmallows* (1996).

symbolically represent and physically chronicle changes in one's identity, thought, relationships or emotions."[43] After manifesting such a change in revealing his nude body (dyed an electric shade of green), a less-than-discreet metaphor for the baring of his soul, Olokun exposes the cast (as representative of the whole of society) for their own freakishness and for masking their individuality in an attempt to pass as normal.[44] Olokun specifically points to Colin Clement, a television-weatherman-cum-celebrity whose overdeveloped muscular body suggests the gay subcultural aesthetic that developed in the late 1970s and early '80s.

The exposure of Mac-as-Olokun's genitals is drawn from Ludlam's *Bluebeard,* in which the tortured title character struggles to create a third "gentler genital" representative of the third sex: "Love must be reinvented / Sex to me is no longer mysterious / And so I swear that while my beard is blue / I'll twist some human flesh into a genital new."[45] In the original Ludlam production, the third genital was revealed at the end of the play—a chicken claw attached to an eggplant that protruded from the crotch of the ingénue Sybil (as played by original RTC troupe member Black-Eyed Susan). In a *New Yorker* interview, Ludlam explained that "the third genital means the synthesis of the sexes."[46] In the climate of post-Stonewall New York—*Bluebeard* premiered the year after the Stonewall riots—the third genital was a less-than-subtle sendup of nontraditional sexual identity: gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Mac, on the other hand, uses his disfigured genital to represent the role of nonbinary-based identity, and more specifically, transgender roles in America, where these categories are often ignored in contemporary gay and lesbian politics. He carries through the trope of his signature fool as one who is at the same time natural and artificial, both born and made.

Red Tide Blooming marked the first time that the media equated Mac with Ludlam's work. Phoebe Hoban of the *New York Times* noted that he "had taken a page from Charles Ludlam's Theatre of the Ridiculous,"[47] and Martin Denton of *nytheatre.com* credited him for turning the Ludlamesque "upside-down and inside-out."[48] The critical and popular success of *Red Tide Blooming* secured Mac's identity as a contemporary Ridiculous performer, but it also gave him the confidence to bravely take his reinvention of the Ludlamesque beyond the site of its origin, attempting to expand his neo-Ridiculous community beyond New York City.

The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac (2006)

Following the run of *Red Tide Blooming,* Mac created a solo show that he could tour widely and easily, *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac*. Borrowing from the form of a traveling

[43] Michael Atkinson, "Flesh Journeys: Neo Primitives and the Contemporary Rediscovery of Radical Body Modification," *Deviant Behavior* 22, no. 2 (2001): 118.

[44] Hermaphrodites were common attractions in carnival sideshows in the latter half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Mac's portrayal of Olokun is a riff on the "half-and-half trick," which promised a figure whose gender was split down the middle.

[45] Charles Ludlam, *Bluebeard: A Melodrama in Three Acts*, in *The Complete Plays of Charles Ludlam* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 119.

[46] Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Ridiculous," *New Yorker*, 15 November 1976, 80.

[47] Phoebe Hoban, "Sea Creatures Spare Nothing, Especially Not the Glitter, in 'Red Tide Blooming,'" *New York Times,* 19 April 2006, available at *http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/04/19/theater/reviews/19tide.html?fta=y* (accessed 14 August 2012).

[48] Martin Denton, "Red Tide Blooming," available at *http://www.nytheatre.com/Show/Review/5006355* (accessed 11 July 2006).

carnival, he transformed his fool into a wandering troubadour who was perhaps closest in character to Ludlam's Fool in *The Grand Tarot*. Mac's carnival world recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the *carnivalesque,* where participants are invited to live in a topsy-turvy world.[49] Through touring, Mac extended the queer world he created in *The Face of Liberalism* and *Red Tide Blooming,* expanding the boundaries of his fool society beyond New York City, where his earlier shows had taken place.

A cabaret that collages recycled songs from *Red Tide Blooming* with new songs and transitional monologues in an intertextual pastiche reminiscent of Ludlam, *Be(A)st* premiered at Edinburgh's Fringe Festival in 2006 and revolves around Mac with his ukulele, a trunk of costumes, and the war cry "the revolution will not be masculinized," which is also the title of the opening song. At various times during its two-year run in over forty theatres around the globe, Mac dedicated performances of *Be(A)st* to victims of hate crimes and violence spurred by their sexuality or sexual identity. For example, on Valentine's Day in San Francisco in 2008, he dedicated the show to Lawrence Forbes King, a transgendered teenager who, two days earlier, had been shot in the head and killed in a classroom at his high school in Oxnard, California. This sympathetic and jarring technique set the stage for an evening of life-affirming yet brutal honesty.

Exploring Mac's personal role within the vast and complicated globalization of the world today, *Be(A)st* covers everything from past lovers to national security, to masturbation, to manatees. At one point, attempting to express his own polysexuality, he reveals that "I want to be a mermaid, merman, *mermanmaid*."[50] Not only does this intentionally connect back to Smith, the Mermaid Parade, and *Red Tide Blooming*, it also expresses a chimerical identity that is nonhuman, nongendered, and physically without genitalia. The mermanmaid symbolically represents the anti-identitarian action of ungendering, allowing Mac a freedom of choice to dictate a fluid identity, rather than one based on a normative binary of cissexuality; he colloquially refers to this act as the radical process of "embracing all pronouns."[51] Mac theatrically embodies this concept by quickly peeling away garments onstage, transforming his body with various outfits that actively represent the possibility of playing with identity, as well as visually delineating different characters and scenes.

At the conclusion of the show, the space is littered with the garments and accessories that Mac has thrown off, creating a multilayered art-piece-cum-archive that records the evening's unique performance. In transforming the theatre into a *Wunderkammer* adorned with strewn-about costumes, props, and errant sequins and glitter, Mac marks the audience as an extension of the carnival space. By the end of the performance, audience members are no longer merely observers, but belong to the world that has been created, a diasporic society of fools with Mac as its leader.

Be(A)st is altered from performance to performance with the addition of local and timely references and discussion with the audience, but Mac closes each evening's

[49] David Bergman notes that "[b]ecause camp likes to stand the world on its head, it is comparable to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the *carnivalesque*, a style noted for its gay relativity and its mocking and deriding tone. The carnivalesque, like camp, is characterized by a licensed release of anarchic forces that tend to invert standard social hierarchies." See *GLBTQ: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Culture,* s.v. "camp," available at *http://www.glbtq.com/literature/camp,2.html* (accessed 21 July 2012).

[50] Taylor Mac, *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac*. Unpublished manuscript (accessible through Morgan Jenness, Abrams Artists Agency, New York City).

[51] Mac, interview.

performance with his signature hymn, "Fear Itself."[52] The folk-style song recalls the community-forming anthems of Ludlam's era, as well as Bakhtin's notion that "folk humor" is the foundation of carnival space.[53] Mac initiates community spirit by inviting audience members to participate in the refrain "we've nothing to fear but fear itself, fear itself, fear itself."[54] As the lights come up in the auditorium, the audience—now a chorus—is encouraged to view the attending others in a new light, as Mac attempts to ignite a spark of communitas. This act of transformation from distanced observer to engaged participant, which Jill Dolan describes as "moments in the perpetual present," marks the emergence of a new and fleetingly utopic community, while still encouraging autonomy and individuality among audience members.[55]

The Young Ladies of . . . (2007)

Following his initial exploration of his own experiences and emotions in *Be(A)st*, Mac evolved his Ridiculous fool by developing his most personal and autobiographical performance, *The Young Ladies of . . .*. The play was inspired by several boxes of letters that Mac's deceased father, Robert Mac Bowyer, received from women after placing a singles advertisement in the back of the Australian *Daily Telegraph* in 1968 while he was stationed in Vietnam. Bowyer died in a motorcycle accident when his son was age 4, and *The Young Ladies of . . .* was Mac's lyrical attempt at creating a tangible interpretation of his father through the words and memories suspended in scores of letters. In this play about growing up both physically and emotionally, he wanted to "discover some common ground" and "[bridge] the gap between masculinity and femininity, fathers and sons, and red and blue states."[56]

Young Ladies is set in a purgatory of postmarked envelopes and stage fog where Mac's fool persona matures during the course of the play, trading youthful abandon for a self-awareness born of experience. Mac's transformation from Pétit de Julleville's *jeunesse* into an adult is set in motion when he is isolated from the society that he created for himself to inhabit in his earlier plays. The fool of this performance poetically reflects on his familial past, while the haunting refrain of "The Carousel Waltz" from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* (1945) suggests his displacement from the carnival he once called home. According to family lore, the film *Carousel* (1956) was Bowyer's favorite, causing Mac to equate his father with the rough-and-tumble character of Billy Bigelow: "I imagine my father's favorite character in the movie musical *Carousel* was the central character of the wife-beater. No, not the t-shirt but the actual person. Bill, that's his name. And Bill was a tough macho kinda guy, as wife-beaters tend to be."[57] Although the strained relationship between a hyper-masculine father and a gay son is

[52] "Fear Itself" has gained a larger audience since Mac granted Broadway veteran Mandy Patinkin permission to perform the song at his concerts. Patinkin's non-Ridiculous interpretation of the song gives it a broader context and scope, although it also paradoxically dissolves much of the subversive anti-commercialization behind Mac's original version.

[53] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Folk Humor and Carnival Laughter," in *The Bakhtin Reader,* ed. Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 195.

[54] Mac, *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac*.

[55] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 65.

[56] *The Young Ladies of . . .*, Taylor Mac, available at *http://www.taylormac.net/TaylorMac.net/The_Young_Ladies_Of.html* (accessed 26 May 2012).

[57] Taylor Mac, *The Young Ladies of . . .*. Unpublished manuscript (accessible through Morgan Jenness, Abrams Artists Agency, New York City).

a common aspect of the shared American gay experience, Mac was the first Ridiculous artist to tackle it in performance.

Young Ladies incorporates one of Smith's favorite theatrical conventions—the slide show—to further demonstrate the schism between Mac and Bowyer. Mac shows a slide of "Dad with a boy toy"—an aged photograph of Bowyer holding a rifle—and then "Me with a boy toy," where Mac calls upon an attractive young man from the audience to join him onstage. He continues to juxtapose pictures of his father in aggressively masculine situations with those of himself in drag and often in explicit and suggestive poses. He thus playfully uses this segment to comment on his own feelings of disconnection with his father regarding sexuality and generational codes. The slide show presents photographs that embody essentialist stereotypes around gender and masculinity for the audience to consider in relation to Mac's gender-fuck aesthetic. In contrast to the stereotypical cissexual traits projected, he wears opaque-white Pierrot-like face paint, a Baby Jane wig, and a dirty and tattered dress, reminiscent of a unisexual christening gown, which suggests an androgynous and desexualized identity. The juxtaposition of this almost child-like aesthetic with the aforementioned weary experience of the displaced fool makes for a complex and inherently queer figure, as the ungendered Mac inhabits both his past and present in one body. Whereas Ludlam employed gender-fuck in an attempt to move beyond gender in plays like *Camille*, in *Young Ladies*, Mac uses it as a medium to switch genders repeatedly during mid-performance, projecting a fluid queerness as he transforms from his narrator-cum-fool persona into his father and the Australian women who authored the original letters.

In true Ridiculous form, Mac relies upon the letter not only for his concept, but also for his practice: the letters become puppets, masks, and finally a dress that Mac gleefully sports in a grand dance to the "Carousel Waltz." This approach brings Smith's and Ludlam's common practice of recycling trash into camp-infused beauty to a more sophisticated level that is rich in symbolism and sentiment. During the course of the run, Mac used a program note to invite audience members to send in letters to the theatre, a proposal that was successful in exponentially increasing the piles of mail onstage and physically representing a network of collective belonging. This technique of creative recycling also forms a queer archive, which Halberstam defines as "not simply a repository," but "also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity."[58] Mac actualizes this notion by creating a physical legacy of the voices in the text, but also of many who attended the performance. As a continuation of this trope, the climactic gesture of donning the paper dress of letters revives Mac's spirit from his state of melancholy reflection; draped in the epistolary correspondence of his queer family in the form of a garment bearing the handwriting of dozens of contributors, he escapes from the limbo-like world of the play in this new suit of armor, dragging the train of letters behind and reciting the mantra "I hope. I hope. I hope. I hope."[59]

This optimistic final action and dialogue not only concludes *Young Ladies*, but also symbolically marks the end of the first stage of Mac's performative career. *The Young Ladies of . . .*, *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac*, *Red Tide Blooming*, and *The Face of Liberalism* together form a body of work that is reflective of Mac's urgency to explore what it

[58] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 169.
[59] Ibid.

meant to be a queer American in the period directly following 9/11. The poignant coherency and quality of these works attracted the attention of New Dramatists, which awarded Mac a Playwright Residency (2007–14). This position ushered in a new artistic phase for Mac, providing an extended period of sustained funding that would allow him to subsist solely as a professional playwright and performer. The timing of the residency and the collaborative nature of the environment at New Dramatists have shifted Mac's focus from post-9/11-themed works toward artistic explorations of other current concerns related to queer activism, including marriage equality in *The Lily's Revenge* (2009), ecological advocacy in *Walk Across America for Mother Earth* (2010), and the resurrection of underground queer histories in *Comparison Is Violence or The Ziggy Stardust Meets Tiny Tim Songbook* (2010).

Conclusion

Mac's fool persona has matured into a sophisticated cultural mouthpiece through practice, growing popular support, and recognition of its artistic value. The development of Mac-as-fool is fundamental to understanding his revival of the Ridiculous sensibility and practice by reshaping Ludlam's legacy as a reflection of the contemporary world. Although as a theatrical form, the Ridiculous broke down the walls of concealment through the act of public performance, at its origin, it constituted a safe space that allowed for freedom of expression without fear of homophobic discrimination. For this reason, the Ridiculous legacy has not been broadly accessible, but has instead been disseminated and transformed through internal channels of self-defined kinship.[60] Mac has extended such alternative channels of transmission by bringing his fool society to new locations and audiences, inviting a more diverse group of queers and queer-allies into the neo-Ridiculous fold. Rather than trying to reproduce the work of its originators, Mac has used the queer legacy of the Ridiculous to pick up from where they left off. This approach has allowed him to maintain and transform the past within the present via performance, avoiding revivalism and upholding the Ridiculous as a genre with continued relevance as a mode for building a supportive community. In the Ridiculous theatre, the channeling of predecessors in the present takes the shape of archival/temporal drag through the reinvention of the classical figure of the clown by layering it with the postmodern fool. Now in the second stage of his career, Mac continues to grow performances out of the groundwork set by the plays written and performed in the fundamental period between 2003 and 2007, with subsequent works like *The Lily's Revenge*, *Walk Across America*, and *Ziggy Stardust* opening up new dimensions in his evolving exploration of neo-Ridiculous performance.

[60] In recent years, a critical mass of scholarship has developed that explores notions of queer kinship. See, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Gayle S. Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).